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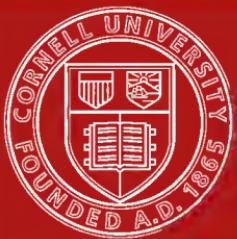
Value to History of the Study of the Fine Arts

by
George Bernot

trans.

BY

D. CADY EATON



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Value to History of the Study of the Fine Arts

From the French of

GEORGES PERROT,*

TRANSLATED AND ANNOTATED BY

D. CADY EATON.

WRITTEN and spoken language, the language of which the signs are words, is not the only language which man uses to convey his ideas. There is also the language of forms, which with no less clearness and force conveys the conceptions of the intellect and the sentiments of the heart. We study the history and the literature of bygone people for the purpose of acquiring a better knowledge of ourselves, and this knowledge is secured, to use a modern expression, by becoming conscious of the different states of mind through which our ancestors have passed. Even the most elementary and the most remote of these successive conditions are, unconsciously perhaps, represented in the depths of our being by beliefs and customs for

* Georges Perrot is one of the leading art writers and teachers of France. Born in 1832 not far from Paris, he was graduated from the École Normale about 1855 and was then for three years at the French School at Athens. From his return to the present day he has occupied with honor and distinction many positions in the world of letters. At present he is a member of the Institut, an officer of the Légion d'Honneur, a professor à la Faculté des Lettres de Paris, and the director of the École Normale Supérieure. He is best known to scholars outside of France by the magnificent work on the History of Art in Antiquity which, assisted by Charles Chipiez, architecte du gouvernement, he is producing and of which seven superb quartos have already appeared. (Hachette et Cie.) In 1891, by a decree of the Minister of Public Instruction, the study of the history of the fine arts was introduced into a section of the studies pursued at the lycées. In an article in the Revue des Deux Mondes, July 15, 1899, Perrot pleads for an increase of the time assigned to the study and for its introduction into other parts of the curriculum.

I have translated those pages of the article which are of general interest as a contribution to a subject which is deservedly attracting the attention of American institutions of learning.

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which the present order and progress of civilization can not account.*

Not to go back to the Quaternary period or to the cave dwellers, there are many of these mental ideas or conditions which would remain hidden from the inquiry of the historian if he were limited to written testimony. One example may suffice: the discoveries of Schliemann at Troy, Mycenæ, and Tiryns have rescued from oblivion a primitive Greece of which the Greeks themselves had preserved but a faint remembrance. Thus has been given to the Homeric epoch a background of many centuries. Now this Greece, contemporary of the Thut-moses and the Ramses of Egypt, anterior to not only Grecian history but even to Grecian tradition, could not write, but could work and use stone; could hew wood and fashion it for carpentry; could mold and bake clay; could melt and hammer lead, bronze, gold, and silver; and could carve ivory. Every bit of material fashioned by the instruments of this period has the value of an authentic document. How society was constituted, the life that was led, what notions were held of the hereafter—all these things are revealed by the marks the hands of man have left upon everything he touched. The colossal walls of Tiryns, the majestic funeral cupolas of Mycenæ, the divisions of the royal abodes of which the outlines can still be traced on the surface of the soil, and the arrangement of the sepulchres hidden beneath it, all testify. So, too, the weapons, the instruments, the vases and the jewels which have been found scattered about amid the ruins of the buildings or buried in the tombs. Thanks to all these monuments we are beginning to recognize in a shadow which year by year glows with a brighter light the features which characterized the world of Achæan heroes of which the image, transformed by oral tradition and singularly enlarged by power of invention, is reflected in the Iliad and the Odyssey.

* The highest education consists in the presentation and in the acceptance of the purest ideas and the highest ideals of all ages, whether they be presented in written or spoken words, in songs of voices or sounds of instruments, in plastic forms or glowing pictures, in humble lives or glorious actions. The well-educated man should be the product and the epitome of the best thoughts and sentiments the world has produced, for he carries the responsibility of past centuries.

From these obscure and remote ages let us transport ourselves to the Greece of Pisistratus, of Pericles and of Alexander. Instructors of youth tell of the losses which have been made, and of how small a part of the literary work of Greek genius has escaped the great shipwreck of antiquity. Should they not also indicate where precious supplements of information may be found to fill the voids of written tradition? There are many variations of important myths, hardly mentioned in passing by obscure epitomizers of the lower centuries, which have furnished to ceramic artists subjects for pictures which make us acquainted with personages and with episodes of which writers have hardly left a trace. But even if we had the works of the cyclic poets, all of which have perished; if we had the lyric poets of whom only Pindar has survived, and Bacchylides whose fragments are to-day the joy of Hellenists; if we had the whole of tragedy, of which we have but the remnants; if we had all of that comedy which is represented by Aristophanes alone; if we had all of the more ancient comedy, all of the middle period and all of the new, with Menander, who since the Renaissance is the regret of all critics of fine apprehension—all this poetry could not exhaust the multiple fecundity and the prodigious richness of the imagination which created it. If malevolent Fortune had decreed the destruction of every bit of Greek plastic art we should have been condemned to perpetual ignorance of many aspects and methods of the Greek soul. Is there anything in literature worth the little clay figures of Tanagra in making clear how the Greeks apprehended and enjoyed female beauty: how they loved it not only in the noble and serious types of a Pallas or an Aphrodite, but even as presented by the humble inhabitants of little villages in the graceful *abandon* of their everyday life and in the liberty of their most ordinary attitudes? If we base an opinion of the religion of the Greeks only upon the epithets used by poets in defining the gods and upon actions they attributed to them, we run the risk of judging wrongly. In contemplating their images we obtain clearer notions of the ideas associated with each divine type. Alas! we do not possess the two great works of Phidias which according to ancient writers made men more religious—the Athene of the Parthenon and the Zeus of Olympia. But even in the reduced copies of these two masterpieces which have

reached down on our time, we can divine how the master expressed in the one the idea of calm and luminous intelligence and of supreme wisdom, and in the other the idea of that sovereign force in repose and of that omnipotence, tempered by goodness, which were conceived to exist in the sovereign of the universe, the father of gods and men. . . . *

Young man, you who are studying Greece in Homer and Plato, in Sophocles and Herodotus, do not pass us by hurriedly. We also belong to that Greece which you discern and which you seek in their writings, of which not without difficulty you decipher the prose and the verse. To understand and to love us, to read in our features the thoughts of which we are the expression, to seize in the modeling of our flesh and in the pure outline of our limbs the secret of the genius which created us, no grammar nor dictionary is needed; only apply yourself to the education of your eye. In this exercise, in this apprenticeship, you will find a pleasure which will become more and more keen as you become more capable of perceiving rapidly the finest gradations. If you aspire to become an authorized interpreter of Greek genius, do not fear that you may be losing time. When, by long and affectionate intercourse, you shall have sufficiently entered into our intimacy to be able at any given hour to evoke in your spirit, as clearly as if we stood before you, a vision of the forms which shall have become dear to you, then the images which shall be awakened in your memories when you read the poets will be akin to those which the same recitals and the same epithets suggested to the Greeks who saw us created. To them you will be drawn by similarity of impression. You will be nearer to them, nearer to thinking and feeling after their fashion, at least by moments, than the most subtle grammarian or the most learned Hellenist who never has seen us. . . . †

Is there a lesson, though given by the most learned professor, that could cause to live before us all the life of the Rome of the Cæsars as do these effigies? In the long succession of portraits which embrace three centuries of history the differences of times

*In subsequent paragraphs Perrot imagines the Greek statues of the Louvre thus addressing a classical student.

†Turning from Greece to Italy, Perrot derives a no less striking lesson from the statues of Roman emperors.

and of men are contrasted more keenly and more vividly than in the recitals of ancient authors or in the dissertations of modern erudites. Augustus and Tiberius, Constantine and Theodosius, all bore the same title, "imperator"; all were called consuls, Cæsars, Augusti, *patres patriæ*, etc. Nevertheless, from the first to the fourth centuries the supreme power was greatly modified. Volumes have been written to explain the change, but there is nothing that makes it so clear as the comparison of the images of these princes. Augustus, in perhaps the most beautiful of all his statues, called *de Prima Porta*, has his head, arms, legs, and feet bare. Over the soldier's short tunic he wears a cuirass and over it is thrown the military mantle of command. He is represented as supreme chief haranguing his troops. Another statue may represent him as a simple citizen clothed with the toga and holding in his hand the manuscript of the discourse he proposes reading to the senate. The statues still show forth the Roman Republic, at least the customs and the style of it. Most vividly is the spirit and also the deception of the system perceived which, while investing a single individual with a power almost limitless, affects for two centuries a preservation of ancient liberties. Turn from these to an image of one of the successors of Diocletian, one who preferred to reside in Constantinople, the new capital of the empire. Do not seek his image in one of the ceremonial statues where, by force of routine, the sculptor may perchance have preserved classic rules; but in monuments of another order where the artist kept closer to reality, in miniatures adorning manuscripts, in mosaics, in ivory diptychs, etc. There you will find figures which have nothing left of the simplicity and nobility which Rome borrowed from Greece, but figures which in some particulars recall the old art of Asia and in others already announce the art of the middle ages. The head is encircled with a diadem. The body and the limbs are entirely hidden by clinging draperies which are very long and very narrow. The materials which form this species of case are decorated from top to bottom with rich embroideries in the shape of medallions, flowers, animals, and even persons. There is no more deception; we are no longer in Rome; fictions so long preserved have finally disappeared; the empire has turned into an Oriental despotism.

Between the two extremes of the series how many degrees

are there which furnish the very best commentaries of history! The heads of all the Cæsars, even those of Claudius the accidental scholar, and of Caligula the wicked and witty fool, are aristocratic. They show the nobility and the pride of race. You recognize in them the descendants of those grand patrician families which at first seemed to hold exclusively the right to give masters to the Romans. With Vespasian, scion of a middle-class family pushing its ways into second-class public positions, the advent of a new order is evident. Vespasian has the round and smooth, double-chinned face of the chief clerk of a commerical or banking establishment. Trajan has the features of a soldier who has probably pushed his way to the front from the ranks. Hadrian, who turns his head to hear the better, whose bright eyes gleam even in the marble, whose half-opened mouth seems in the act of speech, shows the features of a learned and intelligent scholar. Marcus Aurelius with his bristling hair and beard would be taken for a Greek philosopher. In Caracalla's looks there is derangement.. His eye betrays that murderous and fantastic frenzy which seized more than one emperor, especially of those who from early youth had been exposed to the temptations of absolute power.*

Not to personages alone do pictured monuments give life. The same character of sensible reality is imparted to the frame and to the surroundings of the picture, to all the theatre where these actors played their parts. Of this truth no one of our teachers, when I was a collegian, seemed to have a suspicion. There was not an illustration in the cold and dry compendiums

*There is a bust of Julius Cæsar in England of which a cast or a copy should be by the side of every expounder of the Commentaries. The presence of the bust would give new life to the narrative, for there is more life in the marble than in the writing. There are in the Louvre, placed side by side, three representations of Nero which tell the story of the man more graphically than the pages of Suetonius. The first represents the youth whose thoughts are pure, hopes bright, and resolves noble. The second shows the conflict with evil and the beginning of the triumph of sin. The third is so monstrous in its brutality and lust that it must have been taken but a short time before the catastrophe which terminated the matricide's career. Historians may detail the circumstances of the fall of Rome, philosophers may investigate the causes which led to it, but that hideous face in the Louvre tells the whole story with a force so startling, so instantaneous, that history and philosophy seem weak and wanting.

which were placed in our hands. I can almost ask myself if, when I studied Greek and Roman history, I was really convinced that Sparta and Athens, Rome and Carthage had actually existed. I certainly did not know how or where to place them in space, what idea to have of their situation or of the outlines made by the ridges of their walls, their houses, and their temples. All these cities were to me vague shadows floating between heaven and earth. No one of them answered to a distinct and defined form.

If this be the case with classical antiquity in spite of the color and splendor of the narrative of its writers, how much more difficult is it to know and understand France of the middle ages when condemned to study it in its literary work alone! The literature of the period is partly in debased Latin, partly in early French. The French of the day was not the language of the thinkers. The deep thought of the age is not to be found in minstrelsy and ballads. It must be asked of the learned, of philosophers, of theologians, and of sacred writers. But to follow them in the subtle analyses and in the excessive complications of symbolism in which they delight, requires mental efforts which are made all the more laborious by the artificial character of the church Latin, which no longer continued to renew itself at the source of popular speech. It is impossible to see how such works, in spite of their value to erudition, can be called to take part in the education of the young. It is for this reason that lately, by a judicious innovation, a place has been made in the curriculum for histories and poems written in the common language; for the Chanson de Roland and for the works of Villehardouin and Joinville. But the student can only read these in translations, or in those adaptations which so modernize the language as to leave but a little of its original flavor, and which therefore make but an imperfect contact between the original work and the mind of the reader. But supposing the scholar capable of mastering the original text, can its formless and superabundant prose or the tiresome monotone of its flowing dissonances give him emotions which have the vivacity of those which a page of Tacitus or a song of Virgil gives to those who know even a modicum of Latin? Can they have the power to excite the imagination in the same degree as any strong and concise sentence of the historian, any sonorous and glowing verse of the Roman poet?

It is only exceptionally and as by flashes that the writings of the middle ages give the impression of true beauty. The conceptions are often grand, but the expression is always weak and dragging. On the other hand Roman or Gothic churches are not less beautiful after their manner than Greek temples. Their beauty is of another fashion, but many souls are touched more deeply. They manifest no less clearly the power of the religious faith which constructed them. The particular character of the Christian faith of the day is shown with singular clearness in their majesty, in the elevation of their vaults, in the half lights which flood them and in the thousands of figures which populate and animate every surface. As in Greece, the sculptor-coöperates intelligently and docilely with the architect and has occupied no less happily the allotted fields. As Phidias and Alcamenes represented on the pediments and friezes of Doric temples the great gods of Greece and the local myths of Athens and Olympia, so anonymous masters, called to decorate the cathedrals of the middle ages, have placed impressive statues on the sides and in the *voussoirs* of the portals, in the open galleries which run along the façades, on the top of the pinnacles which throng the roof—in fact everywhere where space is offered. These statues, distributed in an order regulated by doctrine and tradition, show forth the Saviour, the Virgin, saints and angels, prophets and apostles, and hosts of personages and scenes suggested by Holy Writ or by local and popular legends. Among these images there are many at Bourges, Chartres, Rheims, Amiens, and Nôtre Dame de Paris, which are marvels of severe elegance, of chaste and haughty grace, and of lofty moral nobility. This wonderful statuary has but lately been investigated, exposed and studied, but already it would be difficult to find a connoisseur unwilling to compare with the most boasted statues of antiquity that admirable image of the teaching Christ of the west portal of Amiens to which the popular surname has been attached of *le Beau Dieu d'Amiens*.

For evident reasons French sculpture of the thirteenth century did not, as did Greek sculpture, devote itself to the study and reproduction of the nude. It denied itself this attraction. All figures are clad, but beneath the drapery which is in fine masses with large folds the outline and the movement of form

are indicated with precision. The principal interest and the rare originality, however, of this sculpture is that it is perhaps the most expressive that has ever existed. This expressiveness appears in the general effect of the pose, in the disposition of the drapery, but especially in the character which the artist has succeeded in giving to the features of the face.

The august mysteries of the Christian dogma, the poetry of the Old and of the New Testament, the triumphant deaths of martyrs, the miracles of saints and their infinite charity—these things which the middle ages failed to put into clear and intelligible words are fully rendered in sculpture. The work of the chisel is large and firm. Difficulties are not sought, nor are they feared. Whatever be the material, the form is sure. To understand how superior the plastic is to the literary work and to measure the distance, compare the Amiens statue with the portraits the authors of the *Mysteries* endeavor to draw of the Son of God. "What can be more flat than these poor verses which are nevertheless of the sixteenth century? The authors had good intentions and an apprehension of what should be done, but they were betrayed by the language in which they wrote. The sculptors of the thirteenth century, on the contrary, who possessed fully the grammar of their art expressed all they felt and have left us the most divine images of Jesus Christ in existence."*

Italy of the Renaissance is quite unintelligible to any one who has not measured the place held by art in the preoccupations not only of artists who practice it, but of all men of all conditions—of princes, nobles, tradesmen and of citizens of most humble occupations. No one in any rank is without a passionate love for plastic beauty. This love was Italy's life and Italy's death. She died of it, because all her sap was consumed in satisfying it. It made her indifferent to her dismemberment, to the hard yoke of her tyrants, to the loss of her political liberties and of her independence. But, at the same time, it constituted the intensity of her life, which was exhausted and renewed again in the ardor with which she pursued her ideal and in her endeavors to realize it under all its aspects. Let him who would wish to obtain an exact idea of this condition reside for

* E. Mâle. *Revue Universitaire*, 3^{me} Année, l. i, p. 15.

a while in Mantua, in Parma, in Sienna, in Florence, or in any other less-known city which nevertheless had its local school of art, its architects, its sculptors, its painters, some of whom, though they only worked for their native city, were not far from manifesting genius.*

The written history of the seventeenth century and its rich literature can not alone give an idea of the situation occupied by Louis XIV. in Europe when he was admired, imitated, or rather servilely copied, as pre-eminently the type of the modern king even by those who hated him the most. After two centuries, have we not seen his wonderful prestige still potent in dominating the sickly mind of Louis II. of Bavaria? In his desire to copy his chosen model Louis ruined himself in building palaces. In this folly he showed discrimination. Louis XIV. when dying, may have accused himself of having indulged too great a love for building; but his edifices, with their majestic grandeur and the opulence of their decoration, gave that royal life a frame which had much to do with the dazzling which all Europe experienced when in the presence of *le Roi Soleil*. In order to recognize and experience, though but for a moment, a little of the impression felt by all contemporaries, Versailles must be visited; the apartments of the palace, the terraces, and the alleys of the park must be traversed. Thus will be thrown upon this historic figure a light far more brilliant and true than could possibly be the result of learning by heart accounts of all the campaigns of Turenne or Condé, or all the clauses of the treaties of Nimègue and Ryswick.

The same may be said of the eighteenth century, of which only an incomplete idea can be had without a knowledge of its art. This century, to which Voltaire gave the note, seems to have had no sentiment of poetry. Down to the time of André Chenier everything called poetry was no more than rhymed prose. The imagination, however, did not lose its rights. Like a stream which changes its bed, it withdrew from literature to flow into the arts of design. There it gives evidence of invention and of light and spontaneous grace. Architects adopt plans

* Raphael's Madonnas save the reputation of the papal see of the sixteenth century, for pontiffs who cherished such pure and gentle representations could not have been so corrupt as Luther's partisans assert.

of happy arrangement. They employ forms of rare elegance both in the element of construction and in the ornaments which decorate them. Such sculptors as Capperi and Houdon give to portraiture a marvelous intensity of life, while the terra cottas of Clodion with their fantastic and voluptuous charm recall the clay modelers of antiquity. Such painters as Greuze, Lancret and Boucher spread before the eyes living idyls, while Watteau and Fragonard conjure dreams of ideal Cytheras, of a chimerical paradise where reign eternal youth and eternal desire. The politics of our kings and of our ministers of the period is but a succession of faults and weaknesses. The best concerted plans come to naught. The most brilliant victory produces no useful results. If France, in spite of so many reverses, still held her supremacy in Europe, she owed it to her writers and to her artists.*

*Perrot's arguments might be used with even greater force in reference to those nations which have had no Comines, no Joinville, no Froissart, no Villehardouin, but the history of whose civilization may be traced in monuments along the Rhine and the Danube, the Ems and the Elbe. In the last part of the article Perrot considers the best methods of giving the desired instruction. However interesting and valuable his suggestions may be in communities where the instruction has already been established, it is evident that there must first be a conviction of the value and necessity of such studies and the determination to have them started. Methods are not difficult to devise, and will vary with national and individual tastes. That American colleges of thirty, forty, or fifty years ago should have objected to the introduction of the history of the fine arts into their curricula is easily understood. Art in any form was regarded by the New England mind as an emanation of the devil, and the New England mind controlled American colleges. Why the repugnance continues to exist is harder to understand. It may subsist from ignorance, from prejudice, or from conservatism. Conservatism may still regard all information to be derived from art as objectionable. Prejudice may still be strongly fixed in the notion that written and spoken words are the only vehicles of instruction, and that the arts are useless and idle vanities; while ignorance may be awaiting demonstration which will have to be strong and conclusive to awake it from self-satisfied apathy. May the good words of Perrot help on the cause and accelerate the time when the best and the fullest education will be offered by the American university!

